REPOSITIONING THE PSYCHOMACHIA: A STUDY OF THE SELECT POEMS OF JOHN DONNE

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Abstract

This dissertation, titled *Repositioning the Psychomachia: A Study of the Select Poems of John Donne*, investigates the complex interplay of spiritual conflict, personal turmoil, and existential yearning within the poetic oeuvre of John Donne. Anchored in the conceptual framework of *psychomachia*—the classical allegory of the soul's inner battle between good and evil—this research undertakes a holistic re-evaluation of Donne's life and poetry to trace the nuanced development of his divided self across religious, romantic, and philosophical spectrums.

John Donne, a towering figure in seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry, has long been revered for his ability to juxtapose sensuality and spirituality, intellect and emotion, irony and devotion. However, what has often been treated in fragments—his conversion, love poetry, and religious sonnets—is here united through the interpretative lens of *psychomachia*, repositioned not merely as a theological theme but as the organizing principle of Donne's poetic consciousness. This dissertation explores how Donne's poetic voice is fundamentally shaped by an incessant internal warfare: between desire and renunciation, faith and doubt, reason and passion, mortality and redemption.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The introductory chapter outlines the central research questions, the scope of inquiry, and the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that ground the study. Rooted in Christian theological traditions and medieval allegory, *psychomachia*—first articulated in Prudentius's fifth-century Latin poem—becomes the axis upon which Donne's conflicting selves are reevaluated. This chapter also locates Donne within the socio-religious milieu of early modern England: an age of political instability, religious persecution, and epistemological shifts brought about by Renaissance humanism and Protestant reform.

By situating Donne in this volatile landscape, the study highlights how his poetry becomes a site of contestation—between his recusant Catholic past and Protestant conformity, between erotic love and divine love, between philosophical Stoicism and Christian redemption. The chapter also includes a literature review, charting critical trajectories in Donne scholarship, from Cleanth Brooks's formalism to contemporary psychoanalytic and gender-theoretical readings, thereby justifying the need for a psychomachic approach.

Chapter 2: A Persecuted Catholic Revered as a Protestant Preacher: Reading John Donne as an Apostate Poet

The chapter reads Donne as an "apostate poet"—a man haunted by the specter of spiritual betrayal and caught between institutional obligation and emotional guilt. Drawing from sermons, prose meditations, and early satirical poetry, the study reveals how Donne's identity oscillates between subversion and conformity. His writing emerges as a performative negotiation with his apostasy, often expressing an acute awareness of spiritual alienation and the longing for divine mercy. The poem *Satire III*, for example, is explored as a textual struggle to reconcile private conscience with public allegiance.

The study begins with Donne's early biographical experiences, particularly the trauma of his brother Henry Donne's death in Newgate Prison after being arrested for harboring a Catholic priest. This event imprinted on Donne a deep sense of religious fear, guilt, and the political cost of spiritual loyalty. Raised in a devout Catholic household during a period of violent anti-Catholic sentiment in Elizabethan England, Donne inherited a legacy of martyrdom, secrecy, and persecution, which led to profound inner conflict when confronted with the necessity of abandoning his inherited faith.

Donne's eventual conversion to Anglicanism is examined not as a simple act of ambition or convenience but as a long, torturous process of theological inquiry and moral uncertainty. He was torn between familial loyalty and political necessity, conscience and conformity. His engagement with over 1,400 theological sources, as documented by Izaak Walton, illustrates a genuine spiritual search. Donne's 1610 treatise *Pseudo-Martyr* is shown to mark his public alignment with the English monarchy, yet the work reflects lingering sympathy for Catholic teachings and the emotional weight of his apostasy.

In *Satire III*, Donne articulates the agony of religious indecision and criticizes blind allegiance to any one faith. This poem becomes an early example of his *psychomachia*—the internal war between spiritual truth and worldly distraction. It reveals a poet searching not for institutional alignment but for authentic faith that can survive the scrutiny of reason and experience.

The dissertation explores how Donne's love elegies such as *Go and Catch a Falling Star*, *The Bracelet*, and *The Perfume* are deeply embedded with themes of betrayal, mortality, and spiritual anguish. These poems, while framed as love lyrics, resonate with Donne's inner torment over religious compromise, personal loss, and existential longing. The transformation of twelve "angels" (coins) into a bracelet in *The Bracelet* becomes a

metaphor for sacrificial guilt, evoking Donne's internalized grief over his brother's death and the broader Catholic experience of suffering.

Donne's love poems, especially *Air and Angels*, *The Canonization*, *The Relique*, and *The Funerall*, are shown to blend sensuality with spirituality, presenting love as both a physical union and a sacramental experience. Drawing from Catholic theology and classical sources like Ovid's *Amores*, Donne transforms his beloved into an angelic or saintly figure, placing love within the context of divine mystery. The study reveals Donne as a man of psychic fragmentation and spiritual complexity, whose work embodies the internal warfare of an era when personal belief and public survival were in constant conflict. His poetry is not merely a reflection of personal feeling but a testament to the moral, theological, and political anxieties of post-Reformation England.

Chapter 3: "John Donne, Ann Donne, Undone": Analysing the Psychological Crisis in Donne's Marriage

This chapter shifts the focus from Donne's religious identity to his domestic and emotional life, especially the turbulence that marked his secret marriage to Ann More. The iconic pun "John Donne, Ann Donne, Undone" captures the personal and professional ruin that ensued from this union: Donne's imprisonment, loss of favour, and financial insecurity. But beyond the biographical event, the marriage is viewed here as a metaphor for Donne's existential condition—torn between fidelity and doubt, love and loss.

By analyzing letters, elegies, and related poetic fragments, the chapter reconstructs the emotional trauma that the marriage inflicted and, paradoxically, the intimate emotional intensity it produced in Donne's writing. Ann becomes not just a beloved wife but a symbol of spiritual refuge and emotional entrapment. Their love, often romanticized in critical discourse, is here reread through the prism of emotional ambivalence and gendered anxieties.

Psychoanalytic theory, particularly object relations theory, is employed to show how Donne's poetic subjectivity internalizes Ann both as a nurturing and haunting presence. The marriage thus becomes another battlefield in Donne's lifelong psychomachia. John Donne's understanding of marriage reflects a dynamic tension between sacramental idealism and lived struggle, shaped by his secret union with Anne More and evolving theological perspectives. Deeply influenced by Augustinian and Thomistic thought, Donne saw marriage as a site where spiritual and physical love converge, echoing Catholic sacramentalism while navigating Anglican reformist sensibilities. His poems—*The*

Canonization, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, and *The Extasie*—elevate erotic and emotional union to divine metaphor, while later sermons reveal an Augustinian unease with bodily desire. Ultimately, Donne's marital theology embodies a metaphysical negotiation between grace and guilt, passion and piety, mirroring the theological paradoxes of his era and his own conflicted heart.

John Donne's secret marriage to Ann More defied patriarchal authority, resulting in social and financial hardship that shaped his poetic and personal evolution. Their bond, though tested by adversity and separation, became a profound source of emotional and spiritual inspiration. Ann figures in his poetry both as muse and metaphysical ideal, symbolizing love that transcends the physical. Her death in 1617 marked a pivotal shift in Donne's tone—from sensual exuberance to elegiac introspection—as seen in *The Holy Sonnets*. Feminist critique, particularly Showalter's, reveals the tension between Ann's symbolic elevation and her textual erasure, exposing patriarchal ambivalence in Donne's work. She is both a stabilizing presence and a silent figure, her agency acknowledged but muted. Donne's military experiences in the 1590s further influenced his poetic style, intensifying his engagement with mortality, ambition, and existential doubt. These campaigns contributed to his metaphysical conceits, dramatic flair, and intellectual boldness. Together, Ann's presence and his wartime encounters forged the complex emotional and philosophical terrain that defines Donne's poetic legacy.

Chapter 4: "As due by many titles I resign Myself to thee, O God": Rereading Donne's Struggles to Come to Terms with His History of Sinfulness through the Holy Sonnets

This chapter delves into the spiritual anguish articulated in the *Holy Sonnets*, a sequence of nineteen devotional poems that lay bare Donne's inner conflict over sin, mortality, and redemption. Eleven sonnets—Sonnet III, IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, X, XI, XIV, XVI, and XVII—are selected for in-depth analysis. These sonnets dramatize Donne's internal battles: his guilt over past indulgences, fear of damnation, desire for divine grace, and anxiety over death.

This chapter applies theological criticism alongside existentialist readings, particularly those of Søren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich, to explore Donne's religious experience as a perpetual oscillation between despair and hope, wrath and grace. The *Holy Sonnets* become the poetic mirror of Donne's salvation anxiety, where sin and penitence co-exist in volatile proximity.

Integrating Freudian psychoanalysis, the speaker's guilt is also interpreted as internalized divine authority, wherein Donne's use of repetition, self-condemnation, and projection mirrors the psychic conflict between ego and superego. The sonnets demonstrate how Donne's speaker becomes both penitent and judge, reliving guilt in a compulsive cycle that reflects modern psychological insights. Further theological depth is added through engagement with Calvinist doctrines—particularly predestination and total depravity. Donne's sonnets reflect a tension between the desire for repentance and the Reformed understanding that salvation depends solely on divine election. Legal and financial metaphors underscore this tension, portraying salvation as a transaction dependent on Christ's atonement, not human merit. Formally, Donne's use of the sonnet deviates from tradition to mirror his psychological turmoil. His integration of metaphysical conceits, enjambments, and disrupted voltas lines creates a stylistic and structural parallel to his spiritual struggle. Scholars such as Helen Gardner and T.S. Eliot have recognized how Donne's poetic form enacts his theological questions. Ultimately, Donne's sonnets chart a journey from fear and guilt to reconciliation and faith. His acceptance of divine grace and resurrection, particularly in Holy Sonnets X, XIV, and XVII, marks the resolution of his spiritual conflict. The *Holy Sonnets* thus remain timeless expressions of human frailty, divine yearning, and the redemptive power of faith, combining poetic brilliance with theological depth.

Chapter 5: "She'is all States, and all Princes, I, Nothing else is": Reviewing the Incompleteness in Donne's Life through His Love Poems

The final analytical chapter explores the theme of incompleteness, dependency, and identity crisis through Donne's secular love poems. Often celebrated for their wit, eroticism, and metaphysical conceits, these poems—*The Flea*, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, *To His Mistress Going to Bed*, *Go and Catch a Falling Star*, and *Spring (Love's Growth)*—are reinterpreted here not as confident declarations of masculine desire but as veiled admissions of ontological inadequacy and spiritual void. What emerges from these readings is Donne's evolving understanding of love, not as a stable or redemptive force, but as another theatre of struggle. This chapter foregrounds how love, for Donne, becomes an analogue of religious experience, promising wholeness but often delivering disillusionment. The poems are situated within early modern discourses of gender, embodiment, and Petrarchan tradition, while also engaging contemporary queer readings that expose the fluidity and instability of Donne's erotic persona.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The final chapter consolidates the arguments advanced across the dissertation. It reaffirms that Donne's poetry, spanning both secular and sacred spheres, is best understood as a continuous enactment of *psychomachia*. Far from being a fragmented or schizophrenic writer, Donne is seen here as a deeply coherent poet whose inner divisions fuel rather than fragment his poetics. The conclusion reflects on how Donne's spiritual and existential crises not only shaped his literary output but also mirrored the broader tensions of early modern subjectivity.

Through works like *Holy Sonnet X* and *Holy Sonnet XIV*, Donne transforms death and sin into catalysts for spiritual awakening, blending Augustinian theology, Calvinist anxiety, and Renaissance humanism. His metaphysical style—marked by conceits, dramatic monologues, and disrupted form—mirrors his internal struggles. Unlike allegorical clarity, Donne's poetry embraces ambiguity, aligning more with existentialist faith than doctrinal certainty.

Simultaneously, Donne's sermons—central to his 17th-century reputation—exemplify Renaissance epideictic rhetoric, aiming to persuade and move rather than dictate. Rooted in classical oration, his homilies were public performances that reflected complex theological, political, and personal tensions. This study contributes to Donne scholarship by offering a unified interpretative model—*psychomachia*—that can account for the contradictions, transitions, and conflicts within his corpus. Furthermore, it challenges binary classifications of Donne as either a libertine or a saint, a lover or a preacher, instead foregrounding the simultaneous presence of oppositional forces within his psyche. In doing so, the dissertation not only illuminates Donne's poetry but also reopens inquiries into the complexity of early modern selfhood, the porous boundaries between sacred and profane, and the enduring relevance of spiritual conflict in literary studies.

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